On the border

Introducing the site

Møhl, Perle

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by Perle Møhl

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Every border is characterized by a particular constellation of disjunction and contact, cross-border agreements, contestations and friction, as well as technological infrastructure, with often a deep historical and geopolitical anchorage in the landscape. To those who pass them unhindered, borders might be an example of Marc Augé's 'non-places' of pacifying transition, solitariness and detachment (Augé 2008). To others, as de Michel de Certeau suggested (1984), borders can be significant sites of intense activity, interaction and human encounters, whether they constitute an obstruction of one's route that needs to be negotiated or a workplace, a site of routine choice-making where small decisions are made around the clock. Technologies play an important part in decision-making, and technological expertise is performed by those who are there to protect the border, as well as by those who study and seek to circumvent it by developing technologies and skills of their own.

As we describe the border world in the Introduction, national borders can be externalized to the farthest corners of the world, internalized in bodies and delocalized as mobile datasets on servers. The border in Part II, however, is an actual physical border, patrolled and surveyed by border guards and technologies. Where borders and border work in Parts I, III and IV concern abstract, delocalized or imagined borders – for example, imagining future procedures for filtering bodies, fingerprints that curtail one's movement, and rules defining the 'proper' family – Part II is concerned with visible border installations and 'identifiable and locatable actors' (Pallister-Wilkins 2017: 64). And whether borders are physical places or ephemeral technologically mediated instantiations, they are in all cases produced through practice and *take place* – in Part II, very tangibly.

In analysing the integrated *border work* of border guards, migrants and technologies at physical borders, Part II seeks to elucidate the daily routines of human-technological decision-making processes, the bases on which they take place, and how they contribute

to characterizing the broader border world assemblage. Part II is especially concerned with the functioning, proficiencies and limitations of particular types of biometric technologies that are deployed on the border in combination with human sensory work and interpretation. It does so by looking at two types of European border – airports and land borders – involving different kinds of travellers, guards and encounters, different types of choice-making and different types of technologies that make or help make those choices. A particular focus will be on the interaction between border guards and technologies, the use of human senses and interpretive work, and how human senses and technologies play together and mutually format one another.

The settings

Biometric border technologies vary from very simple tools like height meters to complex body scan and facial recognition technologies. The goal of this part of the research project was therefore to study border control settings where as many as possible of these technologies were used in combination with the border guards' own skills and sensory work. The goal was to compare how they worked in practice, how their human-technological interactions differed, and to look in detail at the series of infinitely small decisions, both human and technological, through which the border assemblage was instantiated. As a visual anthropologist interested in the senses, in interpretation and in the frameworks – technological, political, organizational, material – that organize the daily interpretation of signs and decision-making, I was especially attentive to the visual and sensory aspects of border work. In particular I was interested in how the border guards were trained to use their senses and to *see,* both directly and via technological interfaces, in order to make decisions. I therefore started out by looking for sites like airports where facial recognition technologies were being used. I also wanted to investigate the kind of sensory work involved in guarding huge material installations such as actual border fences in order to compare the different kinds of technologies, their relative efficiencies and the types of sensory work involved. In other words, the technologies and the particular border zones where they were being deployed guided my entry into the field.

With help from a colleague working for the national police, I was initially allowed to do a pilot project at Copenhagen Airport which laid the basis for a longer period of

fieldwork (see below). The necessary police clearance, once obtained, then enabled me to move from one police force to the next, with a shorter visit to the Danish-German land border around Padborg (see map, figure 2.1) and then on to Gibraltar, where the joint Border & Coast Guard Agency received me for fieldwork in 2017. Various types of biometric technologies were being employed at the airport and on the land border with Spain, along with classic radar and visual systems. From Gibraltar, I moved across the Strait of Gibraltar to Ceuta, a Spanish urban enclave on the Moroccan coast. Here, the border was manifest both as a huge double fence armed with a range of presence-detection technologies and in the form of the sea itself.[1] I was eventually allowed to work with the border guards of the Guardia Civil in Ceuta, but I also became aware of the highly developed (and fruitful) technological skills of the migrants who had crossed the border fence and were now being processed in Ceuta (see Chapter 4).

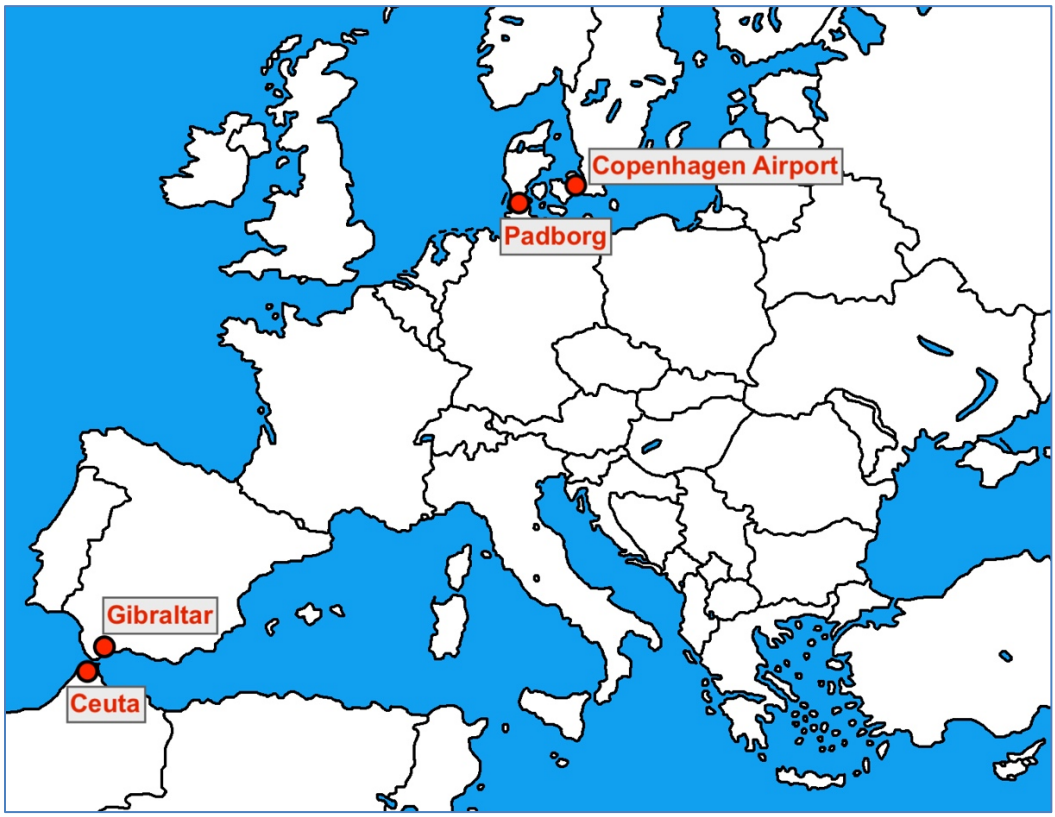

Figure 1. Map of fieldwork sites (© the author)

[1] The sea not only provides a 'natural border', it is politically enrolled to do the work of deterrence and, ultimately, the removal of threats, a strategy described as 'necropolitics' by Jason De León with reference to the US-Mexican border and the large stretches of desert to which many migrants succumb (De León 2015). See also Chapter 4.

The cases presented here are thus based on fieldwork among police officers in two international airports – Copenhagen Airport and Gibraltar International Airport – and with Guardia Civil border guards and migrants in Ceuta on the land border between Spain and Morocco. All are Schengen borders and function under the border control legislation of the EU coupled with national exceptions. But the practical settings and conditions under which they work are very different, the first two being airports inside a national territory receiving passengers arriving by air, the last being a physical border between two national territories with a fence or a sea providing the line of separation. The differences in these settings and in the technologies deployed provide insights into some of the variegated modalities of European deterrence practices, different ways of 'making sense' of an intrusion and different ways of circumventing the systems. In their different ways they also display some of the incongruities of border maintenance and mobility regulation in and out of Europe, as well as the many forms of disconnection that rule both within and between these particular border worlds.

In Copenhagen Airport, border control became restricted to passengers arriving from or leaving for non-Schengen countries when Denmark joined the Schengen area in 2001; all other passengers could move freely within the Schengen area. Roughly 20,000 persons pass daily through the passport control zone at the entry to Pier C arriving from or leaving for non-Schengen countries, mainly the Middle East and Turkey, Asia, the US and European non-Schengen member states such as Ireland. As a heightened security measure, since October 2017 all passengers' documents are scanned, which means that no discrimination based on profiling will take place. Besides the regular Schengen border control, a number of 'random controls' take place on intra-Schengen flights arriving from so-called 'high-risk' southern European cities as a direct measure of systematized Frontex migration control.

In Gibraltar, the border is a highly symbolic and intense site of continued contestation between Spain and Britain, especially the land border separating Gibraltar from Spain that was de facto closed by General Franco in 1969 and not reopened until 1982 (Orsini et al. 2017). Gibraltar is an EU member, but like the UK and Ireland is outside the Schengen area. Because of its prominent position at the entrance to the Mediterranean

and its particular fiscal status, it has become a site of intense economic activity, categorized by Spain as contraband (Pack 2014). However, despite its prominence seen from across the strait, surprisingly few migrants have arrived in Gibraltar according to local sources. The border zones are highly equipped technologically, with facial recognition on both sides: Automated Border Control on the Spanish side and continued facial registration and automated profiling on the Gibraltarian side of the land border. At the airport many passengers arrive with Schengen visas that do not give them entry to Gibraltar, but accommodating border officials occasionally organize unofficial transport to the Spanish Schengen entry just fifty meters from the airport instead of forcing them to fly back to their point of embarkation.

The history of Ceuta – a history of conquest and continued border-making – is inscribed in a complex Mediterranean history dating back to the Phoenician and later Roman Empires, the Visigoth attacks and the Umayyad Caliphate's conquest of Spain and subsequent Moorish rule over the region. Ceuta came under Portuguese rule in 1415 and Spanish rule in 1668, and has since been the site of both warfare and negotiations with Moroccan forces and governments (Saddiki 2012), becoming one of the European Union's external borders when Spain entered the EU in 1986 (Gold 2000; Pallister-Wilkins 2017). During this long history, the border itself has been made very manifest, both by a strong mural fortification of the city center and, subsequently, the increasingly imposing fence along the border with Morocco. The fence is characterized by both its material and technological 'hard-wiring' (Andersson 2016) and by the fact that large groups of mainly Sub-Saharan migrants regularly manage to cross it (see Chapter 4).

Getting there

Since the borders examined in Part II are actual tangible material settings, determining *where* to go is therefore not the problem. Acquiring permission to go there, however, is another matter altogether.

Indeed, being allowed to participate in and observe police work up close is not at all simple for a variety of reasons, as the relatively few ethnographic fieldwork-based studies of policing in Europe demonstrate (e.g. Andersson 2014; Fassin 2013; Feldman 2019; Hartmann et al. 2018; Holmberg 2003). As for border police using biometric

technologies, to my knowledge only a few anthropologists have conducted their analysis on the basis of ethnographic fieldwork with border police forces (e.g. Alpes 2015; Andersson 2014), as they work more often from reports, policy papers, interviews with officials and border security conferences (e.g. Kuster and Tsianos 2016; Maguire 2014, 2018; Schindel 2016).

In my case, I wrote to the chief of the Copenhagen Border Police and presented my interest in the relationship between humans and machines and in the interaction between their *different ways of seeing*. For the chief of the Copenhagen Border Police this struck a chord, since his force had been grappling with such questions themselves. Management, police officers and unions were discussing the effect of automated vision and of automation in general for resource, wage and labour policies. The pressure on border work had been rising since 2015, when new EU and Danish regulations were introduced. Increased border control also meant that other areas of policing were being under-staffed, so more civil border guards were being hired and were undergoing a relatively brief training program, thereby leading to the perceived devaluation of the work of the police officers on the border. Management, in my case, was probably interested in an empirical assessment of what was most efficient – human or machine vision – in order to make their case. The managers also, I was told later, considered it their duty to open their doors to researchers to show that they had nothing to hide. In all cases, they were sending a signal both to themselves and the outside world that this was an open institution, that they were taking border work seriously, and that they were doing their work correctly.

At the airport: wearing a police badge, constituting a field

In almost all fieldwork settings, you cannot decide in advance what will constitute your empirical field. On the contrary, it is *what* you are allowed to participate in and the *positions* people attribute to you that define the contours of what will gradually *become* your field and what you will get to know something about (Møhl 2011). That is the predicament in all ethnographic fieldwork.

From this point of view, one thing very clearly defined my position in relation to travellers in both Copenhagen and Gibraltar airports: the fact that I was working inside a controlled zone and wearing a police badge. This obviously had important implications

for my position and for what came to constitute my field. While I was expecting to acquire some insights into the experiences and the motivations that made people attempt to cross the border – especially those who did not cross it seamlessly but were held back for various reasons – it quickly became clear that I could not ask the questions I usually would as an anthropologist. Travellers identified me as a police officer, and I heard only the things that a police officer would: requests for information, mostly silence, and on one occasion a request for asylum – but never the more intimate discussions that an anthropologist can have with people about their goals and aspirations. And because I was observing the work of the border control agents and taking notes, I was ostensibly a senior officer in the police hierarchy overseeing and controlling the agents. This was an unusual and challenging position to be in and a predicament that I continually analysed and tried to learn from as a constituent of the border world itself. It clearly demarcated my field, what I could get to learn about it and what I could not. My field became a very tight time-space zone constituted by the border itself and its brief and direct encounters between police officers, travellers and technologies. In a certain sense, to the travellers I *was* the border. That also meant that the ways in which travellers related to me and looked at me and in which I looked back at them became part of my empirical material.

In Ceuta: expertise and entanglements

My concern when moving into this very tense border setting was that my position with the police would not permit me to discuss border technologies with those who were trying to pass or circumvent the borders. This was, as already mentioned above, the case in Copenhagen and in Gibraltar, where I was considered part of the border apparatus. But to my surprise, this was not the case in Ceuta.

I had initially made a ministerial request to follow the Guardia Civil in their work. After a month of waiting the request was granted, and I was allowed to accompany a senior officer on his patrols along the fence and at the entry point at Tarajal II, as well as to sit in with the personnel on guard in the main surveillance centre and follow their routines, sensory work and discussions.

Thus positioned with the Guardia Civil border guards, and after carefully avoiding any attempt to approach some of the many migrants who had made it across the fence

and were staying in Ceuta, I was nevertheless contacted by the leader of an NGO working with migrants. She had heard of my research from someone collaborating with the border guards and asked me to do a talk about my research on borders. A large group of Sub-Saharan migrants came to hear my presentation. They, unlike myself, had very intimate first-hand experiences of that particular border fence and, as I soon discovered, they also had very sophisticated knowledge of the border technologies deployed along it, which they readily shared (see Chapter 4). Talking to me about their technological expertise and their achievements in defeating the fence – and in French, a language they spoke well – clearly put their proficiencies to the forefront and thus opened up a rich field of border knowledge, experience and organizational craftsmanship.

This dual position did not pose a problem to anyone. In Ceuta *everyone* was entangled in the border from many different simultaneous perspectives: an NGO leader who was married to a chief of police, a Red Cross worker who was the son of a military commander, a former undocumented migrant whose brother was now a border guard, etc. My engagement with both border guards and migrants was therefore not an exception but rather the rule. Thus I spent my fieldwork discussing the border situation and the different technologies with both migrants who had made it across the border and with the border guards whose job it was to stop them.

Enskillment and learning

Both chapters that follow focus on the interaction between technologies and human senses, and on how they configure one another. An important aspect of the analysis concerns the *enskillment of the senses*, notably how border guards *learn to see*, both directly and through images, screens and visual technologies in general. Seeing is not an inborn capacity, but is socially and culturally acquired (Grasseni 2007b; Okely 2001) through a *community of practice* (Grasseni 2007a). In the case of the border guard forces with whom I worked, visual and sensory enskillment mostly came about informally, by working together and sharing tricks and experiences, rather than through instruction. In Copenhagen Airport, a unit specialized in document fraud presented new examples of forged and new, allegedly forgery-proof ID documents each week, teaching the border guard team how to identify the visual and haptic signs of both (see Chapter 3). In a training program for civil border guards, established to satisfy an urgent need for more

border guards since the introduction of increased border controls in 2015, the trainees were taught to visually scan the perimeter by looking 'down, up, out - down, up, out', i.e. down at the document, up at the face and out at people queuing in the border zone.

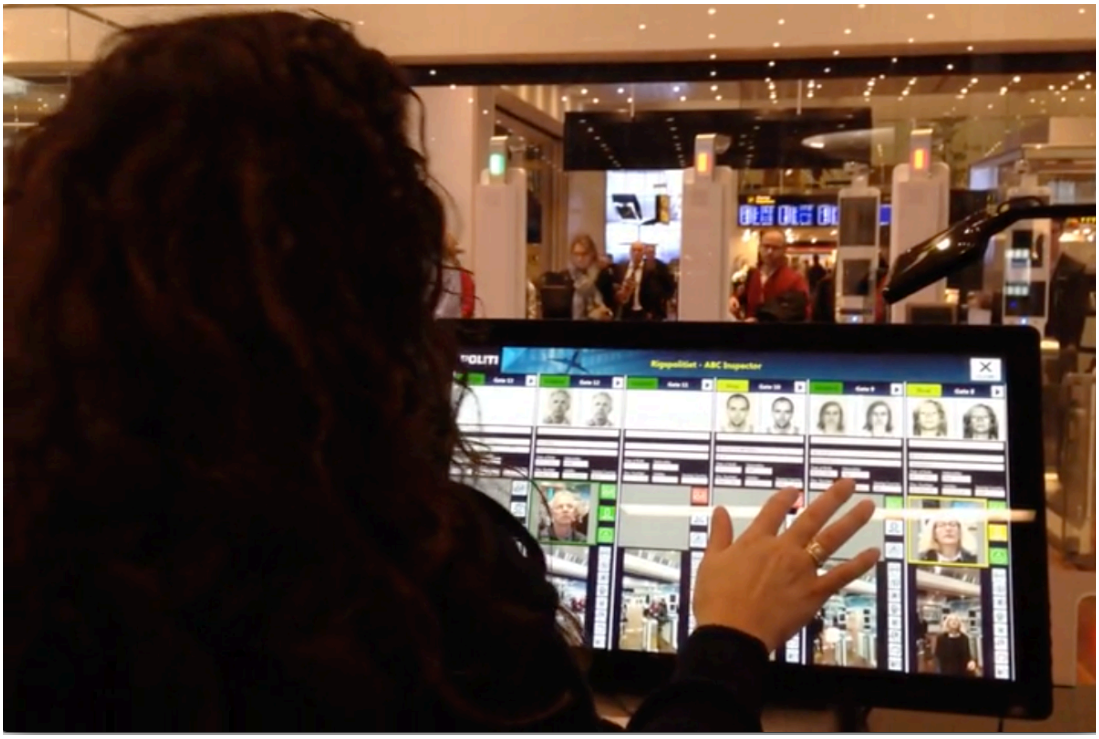

Figure 2. Sensory work and learning to see (© photo by the author)

Thus there were particular ways of seeing and sensing that required a specialized enskillment of the senses, as we shall see in the following chapters. However, the border guards also developed their own individual skills based on their own personal experiences and on special senses in which each of them excelled. Many explained how their 'sixth sense' and intuition were indispensable in carrying out their work, often in comparison with and in criticism of the machines that could not muster such imaginative and pre-emptive faculties (see also Møhl forthcoming). And whereas many of the details involved in carrying out their tasks could be taught through organized and collective training, the elements of their tacit knowledge, such as intuition and perceptive tricks, could not be directly passed on, but could only be acquired through prolonged experience. The community of practice that involved learning to see also comprised the technologies and the human-technological interaction – for example, learning to 'see

like the machine' (see Chapter 3), as well as teaching machines and algorithms what to look for (see also Part I). Thus my work with this expanded community of practice consisted in picking up elements of both technological, shared and individual skills deployed in the sensory work of border control.

Not surprisingly, my own seeing was also gradually becoming enskilled throughout my fieldwork, although my immediate field of vision and sensing was obviously larger, including also the guards themselves and the technologies, as well as the ways in which the political and organizational background manifested itself minutely in the daily border work and decision-making. I was for once not working with a camera of my own, with the particular temporal and spatial selectivity that this implies (Møhl 2011; Møhl and Hauge Kristensen 2018), but was just as focussed on detail, interaction and spatial configurations. In addition, I was observing how people and technologies were seeing interactively and the kinds of details they were occupied with, applying a kind of 'double vision'. However, when sitting in with the border guards and looking at screens and at the people, faces and documents passing by, discussing possible matches and mismatches, I was simultaneously doing the same interpretive assessment work as they, learning from them to look for signs and, like them, also relying on my own personal visual experience. In this respect, I shared the experience of the new recruits, gradually learning to discern and distinguish the significant from the insignificant (see Chapter 3). As one civil guard said, she saw a threat in 90% of the passengers when she started, but was now, nine months later, down to 10%. In other words, through her own experience and collegial advice she had found a balance between heightened vigilance and getting the work done.

How images make sense and go between

Most biometric technologies function on the basis of photographic imagery, whether as modes of recording and verification, as in fingerprints and facial recognition, or as processes of human interpretation, as in surveillance imagery and bone scans. Such biometric procedures of verification are intrinsically linked to and contingent on what are assumed to be the trustworthy and evidential qualities of the photographic image. The notion that a photographic image can provide evidence, and even legal proof, lies in a combination of two semiotic features: first its convincing visible accuracy – in

Peircean semiotic terms, its iconicity or likeness to the object it represents; and secondly its indexicality, that is, its quality as a (photosensitive) imprint of something in front of the lens, providing it with a direct causal or 'physical connection' – a 'contiguity' – with its object (Kang 2014; Peirce 1998; Pinney 2008; Winston and Tsang 2009). In this sense, it obviously has a parallel in the fingerprint that carries validity both because it results from the direct imprint of a particular finger on paper or a scanner, and because it bears a likeness to the original fingerprint, when read and interpreted by both human and algorithmic eyes. The same goes for facial recognition: whether a human or an algorithm does the work of recognition by looking at and comparing an ID photo to a face, it is a likeness that is sought after. But the foundational authority of the process, recognized by all the institutions authorizing the validity of an ID photo, lies in the ID photo's indexicality, that is, in the idea that it is intrinsically connected to one particular face and, by extension, to the data connected to that face.

The chapters in Part II question some basic assumptions that we tend to take for granted about vision and imagery and thus about the 'vision work' that goes on in border control. Indeed, just as seeing is not a simple innate capacity, images are not simple representations or replicas of objects. As signs, they become objects in themselves, liberated from the dyadic relationship between an original and a representation. Here, the image is not just the representation of an original that it should reflect as faithfully as possible; instead, it becomes the main actor in the border process, as we shall see in Chapter 3. Yet in this legislative setting images are still seen as direct representations of those faces in a simple dyad, and authenticating the relationship between a face/body and an ID, whether the reader is a human border guard or a facial recognition algorithm.

As objects in themselves, images also come to function as 'go-betweens in social transactions' (Mitchell 2002: 175). In border control, they act as go-betweens between humans as well as between travellers and algorithms, but they mainly function as go-betweens between faces and datasets that otherwise would not be connected. By 'objects in themselves', I am referring to their semiotic quality as separated from the objects they signify, not suggesting that they become independent ontological beings or agents, nor that they are imbued with intention or responsibility.

And finally, despite their indexically established authority, images evoke, allude and

point out rather than simply tell, denote or explain (Berger 1982; MacDougall 1998). As Peirce writes, 'icons and indices assert nothing' (Peirce 1893 in: Chandler 2014); an image is reputedly worth a thousand words, but 'from any image countless possible statements could be inferred' (Chandler 2014: 132). Yet, 'as soon as photographs are used with words, they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion' (Berger 1982: 91). Thus, where the photo is weak in meaning but carries validity because of its likeness and indexical quality, words acquire authority when they are attached to specific images. In terms of the identification and verification of identities based on ID photos in border control, it is thus the *connectedness* of the dataset in the document and the *indexicality* of the ID photo that provide this last element of authority and 'dogmatic assertion', of 'knowing who someone *is*'.

The chapters

In the different border settings I visited, a variety of technologies and procedures were used, sometimes the same in very different locations, sometimes different ones within the same structure, every time involving new scales of human-technological interaction and sensory work. To acquire a better understanding of some of the fundamental processes involved, I have divided them into two overall categories of border control, respectively *recognition* and *presence detection*, presented in a chapter each, and defined respectively as 'hard' and 'soft' biometric technologies. Both types of border control are biometric in that they register and measure qualities of the body, but they work on very different technological, temporal, spatial and sense-making grounds. It is these differences, their basic functions and respective effects, and their existential and semiotic/sense-making qualities that the two chapters dwell on and juxtapose.

Chapter 3 analyses the use of facial recognition in automated border control, a technology that verifies ID through visual analysis of facial traits. The chapter analyses and compares algorithmic and human procedures of visual recognition, as well as procedures for identifying threatening objects in luggage. It also analyses the role of imagery for purposes of identification, as well as processes of visual enskillment and deskillment.

Chapter 4 presents and analyses forms of presence detection in the control of border transgressions by using sonar and haptic technologies that 'listen' to and 'feel' for

presences and hidden persons, as well as different forms of imagery, notably radar and infrared. They are considered 'soft' biometric technologies because they do not identify individuals but only kinds of bodies. The chapter finally inverses the perspective to encompass different forms of surveillance of the surveyors themselves, whether by migrants or management.

Comparing 'hard' and 'soft' technologies such as facial recognition and presence detection will also somewhat temper the widespread assumption, whether critical or celebratory, that digital technologies are more efficient and difficult to circumvent than simpler, 'softer' or older types of border control. The chapters serve to provide better and more detailed insights into the basic functions of each technology, the different types of encounters and narratives they entail and, as a consequence, some of the fundamental sensory-technological modi operandi of border control.

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NOTES